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CHARLES MEDD

ELECTION '76: THE ETHNIC VOTE

ANNCR: ON THIS COLUMBUS DAY WEEKEND, DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS HAVE BEEN WOOING THE SUPPORT OF ITALIAN-AMERICAN VOTERS. CHARLES MEDD EXAMINES THE ETHNIC FACTOR IN NATIONAL POLITICS.

VOICE: LIKE THEM OR NOT, AMERICAN POLITICIANS HAVE BEEN CONSUMING MORE THAN THEIR USUAL QUOTA OF PIZZAS (ITALIAN FOOD) THE PAST FEW DAYS. THAT'S THE POPULAR DISH AT COLUMBUS DAY RALLIES, AND THAT'S WHERE THE CANDIDATES FIND THEMSELVES SEARCHING FOR THE SO-CALLED ITALIAN VOTE. IT'S ALL PART OF AN ELECTION-YEAR RITUAL THAT IS AS OLD AS AMERICAN POLITICS ITSELF.

BUT IT'S MORE THAN JUST A RITUAL. OVER SIXTY-FIVE MILLION AMERICANS BELONG TO ONE OR ANOTHER DISTINCTIVE ETHNIC OR RACIAL GROUP. THE IDEA THAT THE UNITED STATES HAS BECOME A MELTING POT HAS LONG SINCE BEEN DISCARDED. THE FACT IS THAT WHILE A GREAT DEAL OF CULTURAL ASSIMILATION HAS TAKEN PLACE OVER THE YEARS, AMERICANS OF ITALIAN, POLISH AND OTHER EUROPEAN EXTRACTIONS, ALONG WITH JEWS AND BLACKS, HAVE RETAINED MUCH OF THEIR GROUP IDENTITY. AND RESEARCH SHOWS THAT ETHNIC IDENTITY IS OFTEN EXPRESSED IN VOTING PATTERNS.

WHAT MAKES THE ETHNIC VOTE MORE IMPORTANT -- EVEN CRUCIAL -- IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IS ITS CONCENTRATION IN THE EASTERN AND CENTRAL INDUSTRIAL STATES. UNDER THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE SYSTEM, POLITICAL POWER IS APPORTIONED ACCORDING TO POPULATION, AND IT'S IN THE MORE POPULOUS STATES -- RANGING FROM NEW YORK WESTWARD TO ILLINOIS -- WHERE ELECTIONS ARE OFTEN WON OR LOST.

OVER THE PAST FORTY YEARS, ETHNIC VOTERS HAVE IDENTIFIED IN OVERWHELMING NUMBERS WITH THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY. THE EXPLANATION LIES IN THE FACT THAT MOST FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION AMERICANS TEND TO BE WAGE-EARNERS, A GROUP STRONGLY ATTRACTED BY DEMOCRATIC POLICIES SINCE THE NEW DEAL DAYS OF FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT. BUT IN RECENT TIMES, ONE LARGE BLOC OF ETHNIC VOTERS -- THOSE WITH ROOTS IN EASTERN EUROPE -- HAS BEEN MOVING POLITICALLY TO THE RIGHT, DRAWN THERE BY A VARIETY OF ISSUES, RELIGIOUS, INTERNATIONAL AND, NOT THE LEAST, THEIR OWN GROWING AFFLUENCE.

THE SLAVIC VOTE -- HEAVILY POLISH AND ROMAN CATHOLIC IN MAKE-UP AND CONCENTRATED IN THE KEY INDUSTRIAL STATES -- HAS BEEN REGARDED BY REPUBLICAN STRATEGISTS AS IMPORTANT, IF NOT VITAL, TO PRESIDENT FORD'S ELECTION CHANCES. THAT'S THE REASON FOR REPUBLICAN CONCERN OVER MISTER FORD'S RECENT REMARKS ABOUT SOVIET DOMINATION IN EASTERN EUROPE. DEMOCRAT JIMMY CARTER IS, OF COURSE, TRYING TO CAPITALIZE ON THE STATEMENT AS HE SEEKS TO DRAW ON HIS PARTY'S TRADITIONAL TIES WITH ETHNIC VOTERS. SO FAR, THOSE VOTERS HAVE SHOWN LITTLE VISIBLE ENTHUSIASM FOR MISTER CARTER -- A BAPTIST FROM THE SOUTH WHERE THE ETHNIC FACTOR IS MINIMAL -- A REASON WHY THIS ELECTION IS SO UNPREDICTABLE WITH JUST THREE WEEKS TO GO.

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